The 126th Christmas Bird Count in Nevada

By Joel Geier, CBC Regional Editor – Nevada

This was an unusual year, due to remarkably mild weather in November and early December, and continuing on through the CBC season.

The main story was a remarkable diversity of wood-warblers, with seven species. Most were in the southern part of the state, including two Tennessee Warblers, a Cape May Warbler, and a Northern Parula in Henderson, and a Black-throated Green Warbler in Red Rock. Even more surprising was another Northern Parula in Minden, at the eastern edge of the Sierra Nevada mountains. More typical warbler species were found in high numbers, with statewide totals of six Common Yellowthroats, nearly a hundred Orange-crowned Warblers, and nearly 1,500 Yellow-rumped Warblers including a record high of 30 in Elko, in the northeast corner of the state.

In the northern Great Basin, lakes and ponds that usually freeze over stayed open, resulting in high counts of waterfowl. In contrast, southern counts reported low waterfowl, numbers as flocks seemed to stay farther north. Notables in the north included Eurasian Wigeon in Truckee Meadows and Minden and a Cinnamon Teal at Ruby Lake. Loons included a Pacific Loon on Pyramid Lake and a Red-throated Loon at Desert Game Refuge.

Least Bitterns made it onto the statewide list for the third year in a row, in good numbers with four at Henderson and one at Southern Pahranagat.

The only goshawk for the state this year was in Snake Valley. An adult Harris's Hawk, rare for the state at any time of year, was seen twice by one party in two different locations in Henderson.

Fallon had a remarkable shorebird count in the wetlands of the Carson Sink, with eight species including two Lesser Yellowlegs and an astonishing 101 American Avocets. Minden also had an avocet, as these elegant waders lingered in the northern Great Basin well north of their usual winter range.

A few prairie-nesting gull species also lingered well north of their usual migratory destinations, including five Franklin’s Gulls and a Bonaparte’s Gull in Elko. But otherwise, apart from one Short-billed Gull in Truckee Meadows and a Thayer’s (Iceland) Gull in Elko, it was a somewhat disappointing season for gull watchers hoping for rare coastal- and Arctic-nesting species.

Lewis’s Woodpeckers showed up for two southern counts, with six in Desert Game Refuge and two at Red Rock. All four sapsucker species were found, most notably an adult male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker at Truckee Meadows.

A Vermilion Flycatcher was in Fallon for the second time since 2022, well north of the expected range. Two Barn Swallows at Truckee Meadows were also farther north than expected.

A Brown Thrasher, rare for the state, was at Desert Game Refuge which also yielded the only LeConte’s Thrasher. Crissal Thrashers were found in typical numbers in southern counts, but no Sage Thrashers were reported.

Rare sparrows in the south included a Harris’s Sparrow at Desert Game Refuge, a White-throated

Sparrow at Muddy River, and a Swamp Sparrow at Henderson. Elko had four American Tree Sparrows. Sheldon recorded a junco “trifecta” with a “Pink-sided” and two “Slate-colored” in addition to the expected “Oregon” subspecies. Lingering sparrows in the south included a Brewer’s Sparrow in Henderson, a Black-throated Sparrow at Southern Pahranagat, and single Vesper Sparrows in Southern Pahranagat and Muddy River.

Muddy River also recorded a Bell’s Sparrow. The subspecies that nests in southern Nevada is extremely challenging to separate from Sagebrush Sparrow in winter. Many birds need to be left as “Sage” Sparrows (the old name before these two species were split by taxonomists, in recent years). But in this case, the observers managed to get diagnostic photos of the back, showing the absence of streaking.

Next season will bring at least two transitions. In Elko, Lois Ports is retiring after 36 years as compiler, but she's lined up a team of volunteers from Bristlecone Audubon who will keep the count going. For Pyramid Lake, Dennis Serdehely is retiring but there is not yet a replacement. This count takes place mainly on Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe Reservation lands, so it requires close coordination with the Tribal government.